



Turning **Words** Into **Action**

Confronting Acquisition Challenges

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The 2014 U.S. Air Force policy document *A Call to the Future* boldly stated that the military of today and the future faces a new threat, a new environment, and urged that our force be prepared to respond appropriately. Its message was and is a call to accept a coming change that we cannot control, be prepared to fight new evolving threats, and begin thinking differently about how to execute our mission.

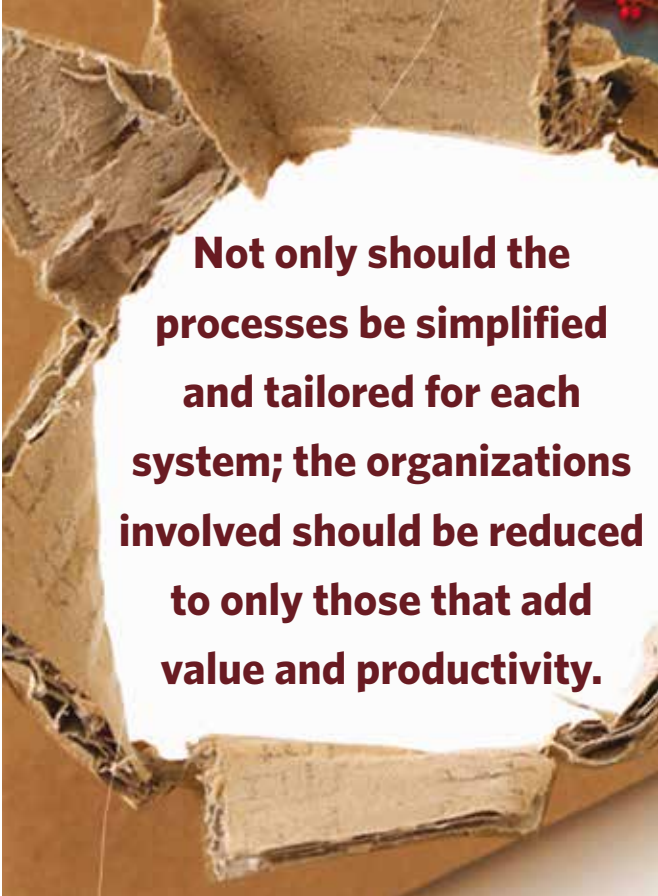
The Secretary of the Air Force asked that we eschew any “stay the course” mentality, while our Chief of Staff stressed that we “continue to adapt and respond faster than our potential adversaries.” It noted that we must be a strategically agile force, with flexibility and consciousness of the strategic implications of changes. Change is very much a theme, as the report emphasizes “changing those things that stand between us and our ability to rapidly adapt.”

The section that addresses acquisitions was titled “Capability Development.” One reads that “the system is cumbersome, as the cost and complexity of these large programs draw additional layers of oversight and scrutiny,” and that agility must be designed into the system being acquired. It suggests an acquisition process that uses “pivot points” designed to change or abandon elements of a program that have become too costly or that are underperforming. Rapid prototyping is suggested to reduce resources needed to bring new ideas online and to make technology insertion more efficient. It promises that regulations and policies will be changed so we can smartly go from “complex programs rife with crippling interdependencies to programs with simple, severable components, open architectures, and more distributed participation.”

Transitions between full-time and part-time work are to be entertained for the acquisition workforce, with the goal of “flatter and more agile organizations that minimize administrative drag.” For the foreseeable future, the pace of acquisitions will be driven by technology.

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This “is central to maintaining the asymmetric our Air Force has always provided the nation.” This also in line with the latest National Security Strategy that directs us to “safeguard our science and technology base to keep our edge in the capabilities needed to prevail against any adversary.”

The warfighters—those who operate the systems we field—continue finding new uses that designers never originally imagined. This “feedback loop” is critical and must be made stronger, as it helps “rapidly validate operating concepts ... and disseminate them force-wide.” But modern challenges remain that must be confronted.

Meeting the Call: People

Current challenges for the workforce involve how we think, how we organize and how we are developed. If we want more agile acquisitions that effectively implement program pivot points and allow faster decisions, then our people will need to change too. Leading troops is one thing; leading a sea of people with master’s degrees and making them feel empowered is another. The challenge to address is:

Our not-for-profit workforce must earn respect as entrepreneurs and be prepared to take risks based on educated trade-offs.

Often when an organization begins a major acquisition, norms are set that may cause groupthink or other phenomena that could cause problems. One type of groupthink involves overestimations regarding acquisition guidelines and rules, that they must all be followed by the book—every milestone, every piece

of documentation, and every step in the staffing process must be met. Another type involves pressure toward uniformity and not questioning the organization’s direction.

For example, an organization may hold on to a key performance parameter that through years of analysis and technology development, has been found to be very unrealistic. And this may be held onto despite the group’s best efforts to start with tangible and testable requirements.

Major cost-benefit questions should not be ignored, regardless of the momentum or smoothness of the current program execution. Air Force leaders now recognize and want to incentivize “smart risk-taking” and reward “constructive failure” to knock down barriers to new ideas.

Another barrier arises when a group collectively decides on a course of action that is not in line with the preferences of many or all group members. This is the well-known Abilene Paradox. Many of us have had the pleasure of experiencing this phenomenon, in which a strong personality may push for something and the rest of the group internally disagrees but no one will speak out because they all mistakenly believe everyone else agrees with the plan.

It is difficult to predict the future—however, time should be given early to testing unpopular thoughts and courses of action. All members—from managers all the way down to the worker bees—should be heard from and insights sought from all direct and indirect stakeholder organizations. All should have the courage to make a change or cancel unnecessary activities if things do not turn out as planned. This approach provides a lower chance of going from the Abilene Paradox to dumping money into a never-ending, never-achieving, and worst of all, never-delivering acquisition program.

How we organize is important because it determines levels of empowerment, authority, responsibility and the size of the project we can handle. For very large projects, bureaucracy can be a necessary burden and works best if planned for early. For smaller projects, smaller groups can handle the load with less bureaucracy. Large projects typically are run by “hierarchical” organizations, while smaller projects can be run by “intermingling” organizations.

Col. “Lee” Battle led an intermingling organization when he suggested looking to “keep the program office small and quick reacting at all cost,” which would later become one of “Battle’s Laws.” Smaller groups can give taxpayers a warm fuzzy feeling that we are maximizing return on investment, yet this does not mean hierarchical organizations do not achieve success as often. The challenge is to ensure the program office is the right size for the program and that unnecessary bureaucracy does not slow its pace. At the end of the day, to meet the goals set by our leadership, our workforce must be empowered and measure up to the employees of the most established corporations and most innovative start-ups.

Meeting the Call: Speed and Agility

A Call to the Future notes that rapidly emerging technological breakthroughs will result in more opportunities for global game-changers and that rapid change is the new norm. The effect to the warfighter is that we enjoy shorter durations of operational advantage. Speed and agility pertain directly to technology and our ability to harness it during its useful life. Therefore, this section recognizes the second major challenge:

Technology timescales are much less than our traditional and deliberate acquisition timescales.

Imagine if new models of smartphones and automobiles were developed and delivered to customers in the time it takes for typical defense acquisitions. Those companies would be out of business. Sure, the Air Force makes more than just smartphones, but most electronics companies offer many models and devices. Then these companies distribute these products to millions, sometimes billions, of people. That is quite a feat. To pile on, they provide a product that most people are satisfied with.

What sets the Air Force apart is that we often deal with cutting-edge secret technology combined with highly complex systems. Then we add requirements that make it more complex. And we deliver only a few hundred or sometimes just a handful of these items. Too often we do not know the true satisfaction level of the receiver of the product.

Last, this all costs a ton of money. Technology cycles will only decrease with time. Unless we make great leaps, this challenge only gets worse.

The pace of traditional acquisitions is greatly affected by the regulations that govern it, the processes, the organizations and the staffing. The Integrated Life Cycle Management System chart has been the standard for acquisitions processes for the last 10 years. Thankfully, this monster is now defunct and has been replaced by the Generic Acquisition Process Wall Chart, which debuted in December 2014. We smartly realized that “we must empower, encourage, and train our workforce to think—not dictate a cookbook that workforce members blindly follow,” as Frank Kendall, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, noted in the *2014 Annual Report on the Performance of the Defense Acquisition System*.

The new life cycle chart is intentionally less detailed in order to be less prescriptive and to encourage tailoring of the acquisition process as outlined in Better Buying Power (BBP) 3.0. Regardless of which process is used, we must ask ourselves, “To what degree are our adversaries holding themselves to the same high levels of bureaucracy, and is it worth the risk?”

In order to reduce acquisition cycle times, process cycle times must be addressed. Sure, mechanisms exist to speed the process based on urgency. We have joint and component-level urgent and emergent needs. However, these are not funded

with the same “color” of money as most deliberate acquisitions reported in national news for having technical issues or delays. For the majority of programs which go through the Defense Acquisition System (DAS) sequence, there are other tools in the toolbox. Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 5000.02 offers an Accelerated Acquisition Program model when an adversary creates a technological surprise. This model can be used where the need is very urgent, in which case it becomes a Rapid Acquisition Activity (RAA). The concept of RAAs popped up in late 2013 and unlike joint urgent operational needs, use highly accelerated phases and milestones to support fielding within just 2 years.

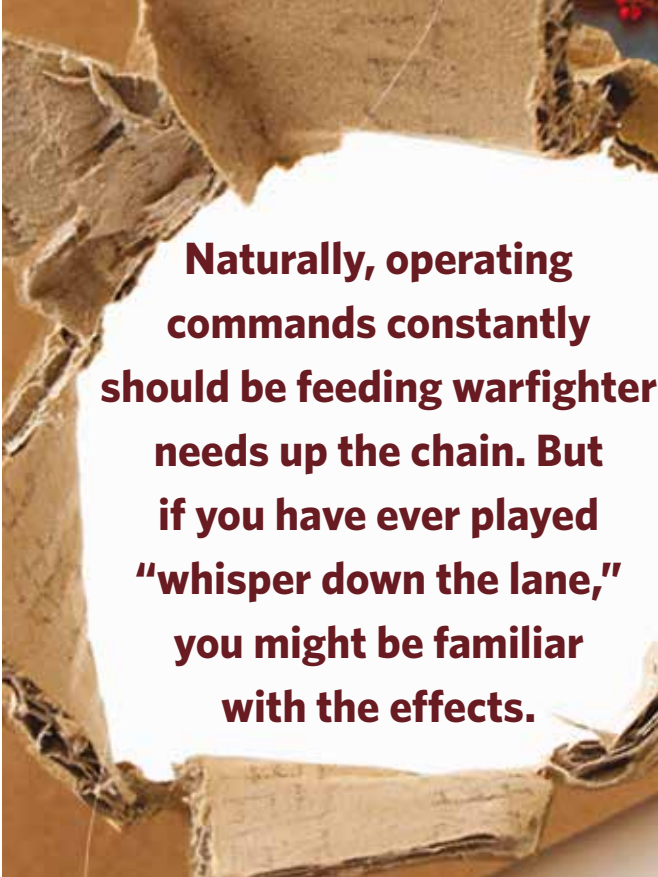
Programs can also use novel methods of contracting, such as rapid technology prototyping, milestone-based competitions and incentive prizes. Examples can be found in the *2014 White House Report on Innovative Contracting Studies*.

One notable form of contracting is Fast, Inexpensive, Restrained, and Elegant, which puts hard limits of time, money, complexity and size to ensure the right product results at the right time. There also is traditional contracting that uses schedule or performance incentives, award fees or fixed prices to put the burden on the contractor. Finally, there is Lowest Price Technically Acceptable contracts for simple services and systems with well-defined requirement sets. Ultimately, it is imperative that traditional system acquisitions are delivered to the warfighter in a timely manner before they lose relevance, utility and effectiveness against a future threat.

Not only should the processes be simplified and tailored for each system; the organizations involved should be reduced to only those that add value and productivity. This means that any organization that performs unnecessary oversight or funding pass-through should be considered for elimination. This would enhance delegation of authority and responsibility commensurate with the program manager (PM) position. Holding PMs accountable with less oversight or dependency on other organizations ensures efficient division of labor within the command chain.

Along with standard operation and organizations, our definition of staffing requires attention. We are all familiar with the analogy of the clock on the wall in the meeting room ticking away with all the dollars over the length of the meeting at the combined hourly rate of everyone in the room. Meeting costs add up quickly. This argument has driven forward-thinking companies to minimize duration of and attendance to meetings, as well as conduct them as stand-ups, where no one has the opportunity to sit. This has proven to make meetings more efficient with no detriment to the quality of the decisions.

Now imagine a clock on the wall ticking away, adding dollar after dollar, while everyone in your organization waits for key authorities to staff key documents, waits for leader’s and adviser’s calendars to clear up, and waits for other organizations to approve coordination of program documents. This is



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an early acquisition schedule risk that is unaccounted for in most planning and acquisition strategies—in the meantime, the warfighter waits.

Often program milestone documents, especially for higher acquisition categories, go through multiple iterations within the major command, then within the Service component, then within the DoD. Now, we’re really talking a lot of money on the staffing clock. Per BBP 3.0, action is being taken to address this, as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition was charged with drafting a plan in 2015 to streamline staffing for document reviews. We all know time is money, and this should be kept in mind when we execute acquisition staffing functions.

Meeting the Call: Including the Warfighter

The cyber domain is on the leading edge where the lines are blurred between development, test, operations and sustainment, as all of these processes can be done through a keyboard. Other systems in other domains will begin to blur these boundaries as well, especially as technology timescales decrease. As our leaders call for a more integrated operator feedback loop, we need to address the following challenge:

The user warfighter requires more say in the acquisition process.

Acquisition professionals are collectively called “idea fairies” for a reason. Because we swoop in once every couple of years and tell the operators what they’re going to get and how we have a grand scheme to deploy a new system with our great

ideas founded on all of our master’s degrees. Then we run off to design and build our widget and don’t see them for another 2 or 3 years.


Sure, warfighters are involved in the process. However, there are two types of warfighters. There is the warfighter who spent the majority of a career on operations with a ton of experience at the Pentagon and who can help inform requirements and future planning. Then there is the operator or user who actually will receive and use the system. The latter of the two, the “user-warfighter,” requires more say in the defense acquisition process.

The latest *Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System Manual* outlines who the primary equities are for key program documents during pre-program activities. Nothing is listed about user-warfighters. Naturally, operating commands constantly should be feeding warfighter needs up the chain. But if you have ever played “whisper down the lane,” you might be familiar with the effects. Compounding this effect, you have very senior advisers who are excited to do their job well and add their own inputs. These advisers do great things informing Capabilities Based Assessments and Initial Capability Documents. Still the user-warfighter needs to be more involved in some capacity early in the DAS process and be a voting member for milestone reviews.

DoDI 5000.02 includes little content regarding the required attendees to program milestone reviews. Nowhere on the new DAS process chart does it have markers for “warfighter input.” Upon searching the term “user” in DoDI 5000.02, one will find few instances of the term until you get to the sections about developmental and operational test. Regarding selection of PMs, the document mandates that they have a “deep understanding of user needs.” How can PMs deeply understand user-warfighter needs if they do not begin to talk to each other until after Milestone C?

Meeting the Call to the Future

With the latest acquisition guidelines and a sampling of modern acquisition challenges, one can better turn words into action. And with an acquisition expert, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, at the helm of the department, we can be sure that the challenges noted in *A Call to the Future* will be taken seriously and the continued implementation of initiatives followed closely. Acquisition leaders should be held accountable for the actions given and resulting changes outlined in key acquisition guidance—most of which was refreshed in 2015.

We should ensure that those not familiar with these changes are educated and continue to change their way of thinking. With a conscious and critical awareness of how we do business, why we do business as we do, and most important for whom we perform acquisitions, I expect we can and will continue to have the advantage over potential adversaries. 

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